

Assessment and Teachers in Transition:  
Assessment Innovation in Japan  
(in the Context of English Language Education)

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## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AEC	Australian Education Council
ALT	Assistant Language Teacher
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
LOTE	Language Other Than English
MEXT	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology
NIER	National Institute for Educational Policy Research
NLLIA	National Language and Literacy Institutes of Australia
OC	Oral Communication
UE	The Use of English examination in Hong Kong



## GLOSSARY

### *Norm-referenced Approach*

An approach to assessment where students are scaled against other students. There are a pre-determined number of students in each grade range and there is a limit placed on the number of students who can reach top grade.

### *Criterion-referenced Approach*

An approach to assessment where students receive a grade based on their own performance. There is no pre-determined number of students in each grade and there is no limit placed on the number of students who can reach top grade.

### *Standards-referenced Approach*

A form of a criterion-referenced assessment. Students are scaled against well-defined content standards, i.e. curriculum frameworks (what students should know) and performance standards (how much of the content standard students should attain) at various grade levels.

### *Criteria*

What students should know. In Japanese, 規準 ('kijun' formally, 'nori-jun' informally).

### *Standards*

How much students should attain. In Japanese, 基準 ('kijun' formally, 'moto-jun' informally).

### *The Course of Study*

A set of curriculum guidelines and course descriptions for the instruction issued and revised every ten years by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

### *Four evaluation perspectives*

Japanese system of measuring students' learning employed since 1992. In English teaching, these are: Interests, willingness and a positive attitude; Ability to express; Ability to understand; and Knowledge and understanding. Similar concepts are applied to all subjects.

### *Letter grades*

Grades given to the four evaluation perspectives: A (high), B (satisfactory) and C (poor).

### *Numerical grades*

The final assessment grades: 5 (outstanding), 4 (high), 3 (satisfactory), 2 (poor) and 1 (limited).

## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, assessment policies and practices in language teaching programs worldwide have been changing in a number of ways at both system and classroom levels. To improve efficiency and effectiveness, some countries have introduced standardised tests and others have introduced outcome-based approaches which use teacher-conducted assessments as a basis for reporting learners' progress and achievement against system-wide or national standards. It is particularly worth noting that assessment is currently moving away from the use of standardised multiple-choice tests to more complex performance-based assessments. This paradigm shift has led to changes in assessment approaches from a norm-referenced grading to a criterion-referenced grading. Japan is one of a number of countries that has introduced a criterion-referenced approach to assessment.

This research case study investigates a criterion-referenced assessment system implemented in 2004 for English at lower secondary schools in Japan. The study examines the perceptions held by English teachers about the new assessment system, the way the assessment has impacted on their practices and the basis of their decisions about assessing students' achievement. Data sources include policy documents, teacher questionnaires, interviews with teachers and non-teaching educators, and teaching and assessment materials. These data are examined using a qualitative and interpretive approach. The study focuses on the assessment implementation process itself and on the subsequent changes that need to be further adapted by the teachers as they enact the new policies. It defines the kind of support teachers need in order to practice consistent and valid assessment.

The conclusions from the study support the findings of other similar studies and suggest that changing one component on its own can not bring about a change. The findings suggest that it is important that a proposed innovation ensures the harmonious relationship amongst key components such as curriculum/syllabus, teaching materials, and examinations, and is grounded in local experience and educational realities in order to prevent conflict situations arising. They suggest that it is necessary to take time to develop a good understanding of key concepts embedded in the innovation, to examine teacher factors such as their beliefs and teaching practice, and to provide teachers with ongoing professional development, in the process of implementing the innovation. The study concludes with recommendations for a successful implementation of a new assessment system, and with a reflection on the bilingual research process.